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An embassy student speaks

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Excellent article on the STAT
"Students" 140008-8



Student power starts young

MEPhA/Vahe Petrossian

PRESIDENT Bani-Sadr still has a long way to go before becoming a true revolutionary and there is a danger he may turn out to be an ineffective reformist, but for the moment he deserves all possible support. This appears to be the consensus among the radical students holding hostages at the US embassy in Tehran. In a lengthy conversation with MEED on 14 March, one of the group's leaders claimed most of the estimated 300-400 students at the embassy voted for Bani-Sadr in the 25 January presidential election.

The students who took over the embassy on 4 November, precipitating a change of government and a crisis in Iran's relations with the US, speak to the press infrequently. They usually confine themselves to formal announcements and press conferences which give few insights into their private philosophy. They have been described in terms ranging from "communist" to "Islamic fundamentalist," but the picture which emerges in private talks is not only different but more complex.

They are clearly taken up with their four-and-a-half-month-old role as arbiters of national policy and a centre of international attention, but their expectations now appear to be significantly influenced by political realism. Most obvious is the apparent realisation that the release of the hostages cannot be tied to the Shah's extradition to Iran.

The student spokesman, who said he reflected the opinions of the others, claimed that at the time of the embassy attack he and his friends had no specific goals other than to end the US involvement in Iran. Since then, they have discovered documents which, they

believe, prove US efforts to destroy the revolution as well as a "treasonable" degree of Iranian involvement in the US plans. The demand for the Shah's extradition appears to have been a useful slogan which, at least temporarily, caught the public imagination.

Three goals

The students' goals now are fairly well-defined: to neutralise pro-US politicians and officials by exposing them, to humiliate the US and reduce its world influence, and perhaps to get the US to extradite some officials of the former regime.

The UN commission's findings are expected to go some way towards fulfilling the second aim, but the embassy seizure itself is considered to have harmed US international prestige. Any further concessions to be demanded from the US will be left to parliament, whose members are now being elected. Religious leader Ayatollah Khomeini has said that parliament will decide the hostages' fate — probably some time in May. The students expect tough negotiations with the US before the hostages are freed. For example, parliament may demand the extradition of General Gholam Ali Oveissi, Tehran's martial law administrator before the revolution.

The possibility of most of the hostages being released by the students before the parliamentary elections was dismissed (MEED 29:2:80, page 25). The hostages will be treated as a group and the students support Khomeini's decision that the whole question should be left to parliament.

The aims have been accomplished so far, particularly in neutralising pro-western

politicians, but additional important disclosures may be possible once documents are reconstructed from strips recovered from the embassy shredding machine. Colour and other clues are helping the complicated task of putting together the strips, but some of the documents are taking 40 to 50 hours to reconstruct.

One document, not yet made public, allegedly shows a group of US military planners at the embassy "plotting" with Iranian military officers for a possible coup against the revolutionary regime. The information has, however, been conveyed to "the relevant people" so that Iranian officers involved can be watched. The arrest last month of naval command Rear-Admiral Seyyed Mahmoud Alavi may have been connected with this document (MEED 29:2:80).

It will take months to put all the documents together and the students plan to continue the job after they leave the embassy. Despite earlier reports, they have no intention of keeping the embassy building as a headquarters: "It's U.S. property and they will presumably want it back," they say.

Independent sources support the student spokesman's claim to MEED that all those in the embassy come from Tehran's four big campuses: Tehran university, Melli university, Tehran polytechnic and the former Aryamehr university. Professors say some are keeping with their academic work, but the spokesman said most have now dropped out the second term this year.

At the embassy, the students work shifts. All major decisions are taken at meetings attended by all of them; there is no central committee and decisions are reached by majority vote, the student insisted.

In an explanation of why the UN commission was earlier this month refused access to the hostages (MEED 14:3:80), the spokesman told MEED it was Bani-Sadr's fault for making unrealistic promises to the UN. The students had no objections to the commission visiting the hostages, but a visit made part of a pre-arranged deal made under obvious pressure from abroad was unacceptable. Any visit had to be at Iranian initiative.

The students also feared that if the commission had visited the hostages before publishing its findings, it could make a change in the hostages' physical condition and custody a precondition for their release. They saw the planned visit as a possible "trick" to reduce the student physical control over the hostages.

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